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### XXX. WILLIAM GODWIN'S INFLUENCE UPON JOHN THELWALL

At two periods in the eighteenth century, literature was more closely and more frequently associated than is its wont, with immediately contemporary events, and instead of being a disinterested interpretation of life it was enlisted in the service of propaganda. At the outset of the century party-politics, the bickering of Whig and Tory, more than once roused Defoe, Arbuthnot, Addison, and Swift to seize a polemic pen, and from the tumult of controversy emerged works like *The Campaign* and *The History of John Bull*, inspired as much by anticipated rewards as by agitated feelings. Again, at the close of the century, in the presence of such a social upheaval as the French Revolution, it was impossible for thinking men to remain neutral. Problems, born of the intellectual ferment of the age and concerned with the fundamental issues of religion, morals, and government, stirred men to a white heat of partisanship and set them writing passionately, according to their sympathies, in behalf of liberty, equality, the state of nature and civilization, Christianity and atheism, and traditional ethics and individualistic morality. Losing contact with beauty, imaginative literature indeed at this time too often staggers under a weight of social philosophy.

Among the most persistent in the cause of radicalism was John Thelwall. As one of the early agitators for Parliamentary reform and as a vigorous pamphleteer and popular lecturer on politics who fearlessly upbraided the ruling powers and expounded the detested doctrines of liberalism, he was a constant thorn in the side of the anti-Jacobins. Tried for high treason in 1794, he like Hardy and Horne Tooke was acquitted. Then he courageously renewed and continued his objectionable lectures until Pitt and Grenville, in ex-

asperation, finally succeeded in silencing him in 1795 by their bill for the suppression of sedition. At this gagging of a most obnoxious opponent Burke expressed satisfaction in sneering terms,<sup>1</sup> the *Anti-Jacobin*<sup>2</sup> rejoiced, and that most foul of contemporary satires, *The Pursuits of Literature*, which went through a discredibly large number of editions, was triumphant.<sup>3</sup> A little later, when he was being driven from town to town by frantic prejudice and was tracked about by government spies, Thelwall enjoyed the friendship of Coleridge, and about the same time his early poem, *The Peripatetic* (1793) provided Wordsworth with the plan of *The Excursion*.<sup>4</sup>

In the course of his stimulating study of Thelwall, the only one that has yet been made, M. Cestre, particularly interested in Thelwall as a practical reformer, has explained his relationship to William Godwin, but has not given a full and systematic account of that indebtedness, and, as not germane to his purpose, has left out of consideration the novel, *The Daughter of Adoption*, which, as much as Thelwall's lectures and pamphlets, is under obligations to the author of *Political Justice*. To focus the attention upon these Godwinian elements in Thelwall's work and to deal with them more completely than has yet been done is the aim of this paper. To students of literature who are acquainted with the extent of Godwin's influence upon the fiction of his time and the poetry of Wordsworth and Shelley, such a discussion may not be without interest.

<sup>1</sup> A Letter to a Noble Lord.

<sup>2</sup> *The Anti-Jacobin*—April 9, 1798.

<sup>3</sup> *Pursuits of Literature*. First American, from Seventh London edition, revised. Philadelphia 1800, p. 116, pp. 99, 297.

<sup>4</sup> *John Thelwall*,—Charles Cestre. London and New York, 1906. After comparing *The Peripatetic* and *The Excursion* Cestre concludes that the resemblance is "more than a fortuitous coincidence," (p. 29). A contemporary opinion which he has overlooked, confirms his inference. After a visit to Thelwall, Crabb Robinson states in his *Diary* (February 12, 1815) "He talked of *The Excursion* as containing finer verses than there are in Milton, and as being in versification most admirable; but then Wordsworth borrows without acknowledgment from Thelwall himself!"

## I.

Thelwall's primary concern is undoubtedly with contemporary conditions, with the wretchedness that presses for immediate relief, and with the measures of partial reform that may be carried into effect without overturning the foundations of society. He complains of very real evils: the frightful taxes and the infamous activities of the press-gang because of the French War, the emigration to America, the high cost of living as the result of monopoly, and the national debt, the interest on which is wrung from the laborer. His cry is that the war is depopulating the country, ruining it financially, and reducing the masses to misery. He notes with indignation that the increase in the cost of provisions has not been accompanied by a corresponding increase in wages, and he deplors the neglect of land capable of cultivation. Nor is his knowledge of these questions purely academic. To gather information at first hand he dropped into wayside ale-houses for a chat with the ragged laborers, and he engaged in conversation with fellow-travelers in stage-coaches, on ferries, and in the street. Indeed in his discussion of agrarian matters, Thelwall was no amateur economist; it was his belief in the social importance of the laborer that made him an advocate of universal suffrage. This man had a warm-blooded sympathy with his fellow-men that was many spans removed from Godwin's self-complacent detachment from actuality. Coleridge did Thelwall only justice when he declared that "energetic activity of mind and of heart is his master feature."

Yet Thelwall's preoccupation with contemporary affairs is misleading. It is surprising to find to what extent he was on the speculative questions of the day a Godwinian ideologist, although this aspect of his opinions was less often revealed because as a public lecturer he knew the value of sticking close to concrete problems, and, besides, he was chary about the premature enlightenment of the masses, believing the mind must be gradually prepared for the reception of the abstract,

startling truths of the new philosophy. His acceptance of the principles of *Political Justice* was not unaccompanied by reservations. Possessing a keener sense for the hard facts of life and for the complexities of the social body, and in this respect unlike the youthful Shelley, who in later years was to subscribe to Godwinism *in toto*, Thelwall was not entirely blind to the limitations of *Political Justice*. He recognized that "its daring excellencies" were alloyed with "visionary peculiarities of mind" and that the book, though "very valuable," was certainly very imperfect."<sup>5</sup>

In some matters, as we shall see, he did not—and in this he showed common sense, if not merciless logic—follow Godwin to those extremes that made the *Political Justice* frequently a *reductio ad absurdum* of its own Utopian principles. But in the main, it must be confessed, Thelwall left no doubt as to his discipleship. At his trial for high treason in 1794, one John Taylor, a government spy and informer, gave evidence that at one of his lectures Thelwall had read aloud and commented upon passages from the *Political Justice*.<sup>6</sup> The next year even after Godwin's unsympathetic attitude at the time of Pitt's Sedition Bill had estranged Thelwall, he remained nevertheless loyal to the opinions of the philosopher. It is evident, moreover, from Coleridge's letters, although Thelwall's share in the correspondence has, unfortunately, not been preserved, that at the time Thelwall was vigorously defending some of the most radical principles of *Political Justice*, and that he had taken Coleridge sharply to task for his unqualified condemnation of those ideas. Coleridge has to admit, however, that Thelwall is "perhaps the only

<sup>5</sup> *The Tribune, A Periodical Publication, consisting chiefly of the Political Lectures of J. Thelwall*, 3 vols. London; 1795–1796, Preface VIII, Vol. II. See also marginal comment in Thelwall's own hand on p. 7 of the British Museum copy of *Democracy Vindicated. An Essay on the Constitution and Government of the Roman State; from the Posthumous works of Walter Moyle; with a preface and notes, by John Thelwall, Lecturer on Classical History*, Norwich; 1796.

<sup>6</sup> *State Trials for High Treason—Part Third Containing the Trial of Mr. John Thelwall; Reported by a student of the Temple*, London (1795).

acting democrat that is honest," the majority of the patriots being "ragged cattle, a most execrable herd." It would seem that reflection and contemporary events did not convince Thelwall of the fallacies of Godwinism. Wordsworth, endowed with a better mind, recoiled from the sophistries he had at first accepted with enthusiastic faith, and wrote *The Borderers* as his recantation. But Thelwall's novel, *The Daughter of Adoption*, in 1801 and his lecture in Edinburgh in 1803 make clear that even after the beginning of the new century he was supporting doctrines that some other men had outgrown.<sup>7</sup>

Thelwall is Godwinian in his ideological method of conceiving man. As he delineates him especially in more speculative discussions, man appears not as the being we daily encounter at home, on the street, or in the shop, but as a mere philosophical abstraction with neither flesh nor blood. In *a priori* fashion he reduces the complexity of man's nature to the fewest possible terms, and what he exalts as man *per se* is a purely imaginary being, a highly generalized type, arbitrarily detached from historical tradition, considered apart from every form of social organization, and deprived of every suggestion of either personal or national individuality. To determine man's rights, Thelwall assures us, such an abstract conception is "absolutely necessary."<sup>8</sup> In other words, he will put the discussion on a firm basis by considering man as he never existed, an unhistoric individual living in a social vacuum. Such a method may be all very well as long as man, thus conceived, remains an inhabitant of a speculative state of nature or of an Utopia of the future, for there he injures nobody. But such a method is fatal when the attempt is made to carry theory into practice. The French Revolution itself was a gigantic effort to realize such impotent idealism, and only at terrible cost was it discovered

<sup>7</sup> *A Letter to Francis Jeffray* (sic), Edinburgh, 1804.

<sup>8</sup> *The Rights of Nature, against the Usurpations of Establishments. A series of letters to the People of Britain, occasioned by the recent effusions of the Right Honorable Edmund Burke*, London, 1796, Letter II.

that forms of social organization, suitable for man in the abstract, were entirely unfit for the perverse, vigorous being of the actual world.

For Thelwall as for Godwin, the supreme possession that dignifies man, is his reason. Like his master he regards it as omnipotent, and because he has such absolute faith in its operations, he believes in the finality of private judgment for the determination of truth. Let every current opinion and established tradition, he urges, to be taken before the bar of reason and be examined as to its validity. He reveals the blind confidence of a Godwinian individualist when he insists upon this necessity of subjecting every accepted belief to "the same test of experimental investigation," and again when he impresses upon each of his hearers as an obligation the importance of conducting this investigation independently.

You may listen, it is true, to the doctrines of another; but if you make not use of your own reason to inquire and investigate whether they are true or false, you . . . will never attain the true philosophical light of truth and benevolence. Scrutinize everything you hear from every one; and most of all, everything that you hear from me. . . . Think not, therefore, that I wish you to take for granted everything I tell you. You must have your knowledge not as a parrot has his by rote; but from the labours of your own minds; from the feelings and convictions of your own hearts.<sup>9</sup>

If Thelwall is Godwinian in his unequivocal recognition of the individual's right to act upon the dictates of his own understanding, no less closely does he follow the teachings of *Political Justice* in his belief that complete freedom in the pursuit of truth is the necessary condition of growth for both the individual and society. To anything like the petrification

<sup>9</sup> Lecture: 'On the Nature and Calamities of War.' *The Tribune*, I, 61 (seq.)—cf. p. 149. Compare Godwin's statement: "But, by conforming ourselves to the principles of our constitution, in this respect (i.e. "to employ our understandings and increase our discernment"), we most effectually exclude all following, or implicit assent. . . . We must bring everything to the standard of reason. Nothing must be admitted either as principle or precept, that will not support this trial." *Political Justice*, Third Ed., London, 1798, Book I, Ch. V.

of thought in the form of prejudice or tradition he is antagonistic. Like Godwin he emphasizes that opinion must be in a state of constant flux and flow. Man must be in a position to revise his past judgments, to act in the light of newly acquired knowledge, to sift the true from the false without reference to external authority. No conclusion should be regarded as final; no principle should be formulated dogmatically. The mind should be on the alert, always hospitable to fresh ideas, never so attached to the old as to slam the door in the face of the new. Thelwall, consistent with his doctrine, assures his audience that if reflection reveals to him any flaws in his own reasoning, he will feel no shame in publicly announcing his change of belief.<sup>10</sup> Thelwall, measuring man by an individualistic formula, would, like Godwin, turn him adrift in an ocean of speculation with no light to guide him but that furnished by his intelligence. The fact is, had these ideologists observed man as he appears in the world and had they really made a serious attempt to employ their reason in analyzing the data of experience, they would have soon been convinced that man was a far more complex and more helpless creature than they conceived him to be. Ironically enough, the error of their own deductions is sufficient proof that the reason is not infallible. Coleridge with justice realized that uncompromising rationalists like Godwin are "arrogant because they are ignorant and boastful of the strength of reason because they have never tried it enough to know its weakness."<sup>11</sup>

In his amazing chapter on "Human Inventions Susceptible of Perpetual Improvement," Godwin infers the probability of continual moral and social evolution from what man through his reason has already accomplished in the course of his development from a savage state. In the golden age of the future, when mind shall be supreme over matter, it is not impossible that desire will be bridled, men,

<sup>10</sup> *The Tribune* I, 149.

<sup>11</sup> *Early Recollections, chiefly relating to the late Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, Joseph Cottle, 2 vols. London 1837, I. 254.



guided by reason, will cease to propagate when they realize the evil of over-population, disease will be a thing of the past, life will be indefinitely prolonged, and adults will indulge in the austere pleasures of speculation and benevolence. Thelwall accepts this doctrine of perfectibility, and throws out hints of that "paradise of felicity into which the unrestrained improvement of human intellect might in time convert this hitherto contentious globe." But his mind is of too practical a turn and is too engrossed with the consideration of concrete contemporary evils to busy itself with the domestic privacies of the millennium. He gives us only occasional glimpses of that future the delights of which Shelley loved to dwell upon in terms of passionate, glowing beauty. Nevertheless, we must recognize that because he does think "the tendency of the human mind, considered in the aggregate, is to perpetual improvement,"<sup>12</sup> and because he does expect so much to result from free intellectual inquiry, he is outraged that the government by every means in its power seeks to interfere with the operation of those forces upon which the process of perfectibility depends. Pitt, for example, has attempted to stop Thelwall's own lectures, packed his audience with spies and informers, and threatened with severe penalties landlords who wished to rent him rooms for his discussions. In its anxiety to crush liberal opinion the government prosecutes independent thinkers who would change social institutions that have outgrown their usefulness, and in pursuance of such a tyrannic policy it has condemned to transportation the English patriots, Gerrald and Margarot. It is characteristic that Thelwall whose mind habitually worked with more concrete conceptions than did Godwin's, should thus bring home to his audience his general idea by reference to contemporary events with which they were all familiar.

Consistent with his Godwinian faith in truth as the supreme regenerating force, Thelwall at all times opposes the

<sup>12</sup> Lecture on the system of terror and persecution adopted by the present ministry. *The Tribune*, I, 261.

employment of any kind of violence as a means of hastening reform in social conditions. He thinks that in an atmosphere, tempestuous with tumult, the passions have full sway, issues are beclouded with hatreds, and reason cannot pursue its investigations. This sound doctrine of *Political Justice*, insisted upon so many times in its pages, Thelwall preached continuously at his lectures in the Beaufort Buildings and at the great public outdoor meetings of the English radicals. On October 26, 1795 at the huge gathering in the neighborhood of Copenhagen House, when the audience was estimated at 150,000, Thelwall took as his subject, "Peaceful Discussion, and not Tumultuary Violence, the means of Redressing National Grievance." He deplored the excesses in France, and frequently impressed upon his hearers that conditions in England did not warrant resort to such desperate measures. There "Reform, like a long-woo'd virgin, shall come at last, in the unsullied robes of Peace, and, in the Temple of Concord, shall give her hand to Reason."<sup>13</sup>

In Godwin's opinion, however, Thelwall's methods, notwithstanding his condemnation of violence, were not sufficiently pacific to advance the cause of truth. Poor Godwin's disciples, indeed, frequently more impetuous than he, and eager to accelerate in some degree the approach of the millennium, gave him more trouble than he bargained for. Many years later he had to bring to bear upon the youthful Shelley all the weight of argument to induce him to desist from his Irish propaganda as calculated to stir up strife and to impede rather than advance enlightenment. Now, in Thelwall's case, Godwin, heartily disapproving of his disciple's incessant activity as a lecturer, was mightily disturbed and on more than one occasion sought to dissuade him from his undertaking. Thelwall listened to his admonitions, but thinking that Godwin was over-scrupulous and failed to comprehend justly the tendency of his discussions as a means to reform, continued his work zealously. The up-

<sup>13</sup> *Sober Reflections on the Seditious and Inflammatory Letter of the Right Honorable E. Burke to a Noble Lord.* London, 1796.

shot was that, when Pitt and Grenville's bill (1795) for the suppression of sedition was being considered by Parliament, Godwin published an anonymous pamphlet in which he supported the action taken by the government against the radicals.<sup>14</sup>

Godwin argues that it is the business of the governing powers to see to it that reformers, in their effort to eradicate the abuses that have crept into the social structure, do not overturn this vast, complex organization and destroy beyond repair the precious accomplishment of generations of human exertion. After condemning the activities of the London Corresponding Society and emphasizing its perilous resemblance to the Jacobin Society of Paris, he points out in particular the dangerous possibilities of the lectures Thelwall had been delivering for two years in the Beaufort Buildings. Godwin advances his well-known objection that as social reconstruction is "a delicate and awful task" which can be achieved only by the gradual enlightenment of the public mind carried on through a long period of preparation, a political speaker, especially when he is "an impatient and headlong reformer," is not in a position to weigh his words with necessary deliberation and arrive at truth before a large excited audience and under the demoralizing stimulus of their clamorous applause. He appeals to their passions rather than to their reason, and if, as "saving clauses," he urges the practice of universal benevolence and utters remonstrances against violence, he is like "Lord George Gordon preaching peace to the rioters in Westminster Hall" or "Iago adjuring Othello not to dishonor himself by giving harbour to a thought of jealousy"—"Reform!—How often has thy standard been unfurled by demagogues and by assassins been drenched and disfigured with human gore!"

Godwin, the philosopher of anarchy, on this occasion has been driven by his frigid logic into an incongruous alliance

<sup>14</sup> *Considerations on Lord Grenville's and Mr. Pitt's Bills concerning Treasonable and Seditious Practices and Unlawful Assemblies*, by a Lover of Order, London.

with the conservatives. He sounds the note of alarm, says nothing that would not increase the fears and intensify the hostility of the public against the reformers, and indeed forces the action of the government. Certainly his unfeeling, inept comparisons and ill-timed rhetorical flourishes were calculated to afford poor Thelwall only the bitterest consolation. Godwin provides Thelwall's enemies with the bludgeon with which they may beat him down. That upon analysis he finds the two bills iniquitous and ill-adapted to accomplish the results they aimed at would make little impression upon conservative readers. They would forget the sentiments they did not approve, and remember that a Lover of Order, himself an avowed reformer, admitted that the tendency of Thelwall's lectures was to prepare men for "purposes, more or less similar to those of the Jacobin Society of Paris." The fact is Godwin's philosophy made him, in this instance, at any rate, cruel and treacherous, and when Thelwall, wounded and indignant, bitterly reproached him, he defended himself with irritating self-complacency. But, as we have already remarked, even though this incident strained the personal relations of Godwin and Thelwall, it did not destroy the latter's confidence in the philosophy of *Political Justice*, for the very next year in his correspondence with Coleridge Thelwall was warmly defending the most radical doctrines to be found in the book.

## II.

We have seen the extent of Thelwall's indebtedness to Godwin in the matter of his conception of man as an intellectual being. For his attitude toward man as a moral being Thelwall is under no less obligation to the author of *Political Justice*. Godwin, denying in their relation to human character the influence of innate ideas, instincts, antenatal impressions, and climate, argues that man is born into the world without any predispositions, and what he afterwards becomes is the result of the molding forces of his environment. As an eighteenth century determinist, Godwin believes man

cannot help being what he is, since he is without means of controlling the circumstances that shape his character. As he puts it, "Man is in reality a passive, and not an active being."<sup>15</sup> And the logically consistent, though startling, conclusion follows, "The assassin cannot help the murder he commits, any more than the dagger."<sup>16</sup> This doctrine of necessity, which Godwin has derived from the French philosophers, Thelwall makes his own. The principle which Shelley later in *Queen Mab* was to exalt as the "mother of the world," Thelwall in one passage states thus: "For men are but machines performing, under the inevitable laws of necessity, precisely the part which under circumstances exactly similar any other individual must inevitably have performed."<sup>17</sup> Because it does relieve man of all responsibility for his acts, there obviously flow from this doctrine most significant ethical consequences. In particular it sanctions, and indeed makes morally imperative, a large charity toward the wrongdoer as the victim of circumstances. It revolutionizes the whole theory of punishment as a justified penalty inflicted by society for violation of its laws, and, accordingly, stamps such methods of social vengeance as both irrational and brutally cruel. Upon this conception rests Godwin's whole condemnation of penal codes; and Thelwall is only following in his footsteps when, with the horrors of the Terror in his mind, he laments the folly of punishing men who were merely victims of the system under which they lived.<sup>18</sup>

Like Godwin, Thelwall also believes that a wrongdoer is to be brought to righteousness, not by the infliction of physical pain, but by the power of argument and the sweet persuasiveness of truth. "Virtue and beneficence are still attainable; and the same energies which, under the delusions

<sup>15</sup> *Political Justice*—Vol. I, Bk. IV, Ch. VIII.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, Vol. II, Bk. VII, Ch. 1.

<sup>17</sup> *The Tribune* I, 54. cf. *On the Moral Tendency of a System of Spies and Informers*. London 1794. For Shelley on necessity see *Queen Mab*. Canto VI.

<sup>18</sup> *The Tribune* I, 54.

of error, made him criminal, guided by the light of truth, might produce such qualities and such effects as would make full compensation to the world."<sup>19</sup> When Thelwall was in the Tower awaiting his trial for high treason, Godwin with a stern consistency that at the time may not have been entirely palatable to the prisoner, took him severely to task for his resentment against his prosecutors. "How senseless and idiot-like it is to be angry with what we know to be a mere passive instrument, moved according to certain regular principles and in no degree responsible for its operations!"<sup>20</sup> Then, after this questionable consolation, Godwin, as he had done a few months previously in the case of the patriot Joseph Gerrald, charged with treason, urges Thelwall to practice benevolence and to bring to bear upon the minds of the jurymen the infallible appeal of the truth in all her unadorned simplicity.<sup>21</sup>

Thelwall, it is evident, accepts Godwin's solution of the problem of evil. Similarly he agrees with him that justice, synonymous in this instance with the utilitarian ideal, the greatest good of the greatest number, is the supreme virtue, the absolute criterion by which conduct is to be judged.<sup>22</sup> His application of this standard has Godwin's ideological inflexibility, and though he may mellow his statement of his ethical convictions more frequently than does his teacher, yet, in the final analysis, Thelwall is in harmony with him. He insists that "all virtue must be an *active*, not of a *passive* nature," and in so doing he stresses a doctrine that impelled

<sup>19</sup> *The Tribune* I, 151. Compare this statement from Godwin's *Caleb Williams* (Vol. II, Ch. VI) when reference is made to the murderer Falkland. "If he have been criminal, that is owing to circumstances; the same qualities under other circumstances would have been, or rather were sublimely beneficent."

<sup>20</sup> Cestre, *John Thelwall*, Appendix.

<sup>21</sup> For letter to Gerrald see Kegan Paul, *William Godwin and his Contemporaries*, I, 125.

<sup>22</sup> The material for this part of the discussion is based on the lectures "On the Moral and Political Influence of the Prospective Principle of Virtue." *The Tribune*, I, 147, 222.

sincere Godwinians to give unremitting attention to the destruction of prejudice and the propagation of truth, as the only adequate means of advancing the cause of universal benevolence.

In this connection it is curious to note how Godwin's followers echo one another. Thelwall says, "that every moment of our existence has its duties . . . therefore, . . . not one thought can virtuously be cast away in any other employment but that of seeking to promote the present and future happiness of mankind." Shelley, young, impulsive, and sympathetic, writes to Godwin how *Political Justice* affected him. "I beheld, in short, that I had duties to perform. . . . My plan is that of resolving to lose no opportunity to disseminate truth and happiness." Acting upon his conviction, Shelley sent his little tract, *The Necessity of Atheism*, to dignitaries of the Church of England, and not long after set out on his journey of enlightenment to Ireland. Certainly this ideal is indicative not only of generosity of spirit, but also of a futile optimism that refuses to be restrained by a sane respect for man's limited capacity for both discovering the truth and influencing his fellows by his convictions. It is the romantic faith of an individualistic age.

Thelwall's adoption of utility as his ethical criterion leads him to make, with reference to moral tendencies, an interesting classification that is unquestionably Godwinian in origin, but what was implied rather than fully expressed in *Political Justice*, Thelwall has elaborated and definitely formulated. His philosophy required Godwin to rank energy as a precious excellence because it was the native power by which the utilitarian ideal might be achieved, and so highly does he evaluate it that the mere expenditure of force wins his admiration, regardless of the ends for which it may be exerted. Accordingly, he is able to describe with enthusiasm the misdeeds of a robber-band in *Caleb Williams* and the crimes of a Bethlam Gabor in *St. Leon*. Sin—what is it for him? Merely energy misdirected, the result of ignorance, and possible for the individual only so long as he remains

unenlightened. As is shown in *Fleetwood* especially, Godwin disapproves of the "Weltschmerz," that lassitude of pessimism, because it exhausts the energies of the individual and impairs his usefulness. Likewise he condemns any form of punishment which has for its end the infliction of pain for a past irrevocable action rather than such a reformation of the wrongdoer's character as will increase for the future his social value.

Now Thelwall, having completely assimilated Godwin's thought, makes clear its implications by distinguishing between what he calls "the retrospective and prospective system of ethics." The former is preoccupied with the individual's relation to his past and sets a premium upon repentance and remorse, regarding as the essence of moral action the wasteful expenditure of energy in unavailing regret for irretrievable errors, and inspiring penal codes with the savage spirit of retributive justice. The latter system is concerned not with the individual's past, but seeks to increase his effectiveness as an instrument of social good by urging him to an exertion of energy in behalf of the future happiness of mankind. Thus will be saved from blight "powers of mind" that "might have darted like lightning from one extremity of the universe to another." In other words, Thelwall, like Godwin, aims at the accomplishment of the greatest good to the greatest number, and condemns whatever interferes with this ideal of moral action. With a conscientiousness which to-day impresses us as almost comic, these ideologists attempted to practice their doctrines. Godwin refused to visit Thelwall, while the latter was imprisoned in the Tower, on the ground that as some danger was entailed by such a visit, he sacrificed the personal gratification of seeing Thelwall to the greater utility served by protecting his life for the public benefit! Thelwall himself was inspired to lecture upon the evil of retrospection by his recognition of his duty to control his grief at his mother's recent death and to betake himself, even at that painful hour, to his humble task of spreading truth among the living.



As Thelwall studied the society of his time, he became convinced that it was the policy of those in power to support the retrospective system of ethics. Princes, stirred by a desire for revenge, carry on devastating wars, and priests make capital out of the past errors of men, prolonging the periods of repentance and by the fearful punishments which they preach are in store for the evildoer, enslaving him to their will and rendering nugatory his capacity for the achievement of positive good. Among "the pretended virtues" of the retrospective system which Thelwall slaughtered on the altar of universal benevolence, was patriotism, that foolish sentiment which fosters hatred between men who are separated from one another merely by "a fancied line upon a map, or a little dirty pool of troubled water." Especially significant of Thelwall's allegiance to Godwin's principle in its most extreme form is his discussion of gratitude. He admits that he has "a delicate task to perform" in raising any question as to its essential nature, especially as Godwin's repudiation of gratitude as a virtue has brought him into so much odium. But "a chain of serious reasoning" has convinced Thelwall that it is a vice. It requires the individual to act in violation of the supreme principle of justice and to bestow favors upon and to exert his energies in behalf of others, not because their capacity for benefiting mankind as a whole is greater, but because they have in the past conferred a kindness upon him. Godwin, with an imperturbable logic that shocked some of his contemporaries and merely amused others, had asserted that if a son had to choose between saving from death by fire his own father and a philosopher, the principle of public utility exacted the rescue of the latter. In a similar uncompromising spirit Thelwall insists that we should prefer to the needs of one to whom we are attached by blood and appreciation of past favors, the claims of our bitter enemy in case the latter has the greater power to "diffuse felicity through a wide sphere of human population." In *St. Leon* and *Fleetwood* Godwin sentimentalized over the fidelity of dogs. Thelwall sternly withdraws such moral

approbation, for poor Fido, merely selfishly grateful to the hand that has fed him, protects his master with equal courage whether he be a perjurer or "Benefactor of the sentient universe." Can we wonder that Thelwall's Edinburgh audience interrupted with contemptuous laughs this public elimination of the dog as a moral being?<sup>23</sup>

It is evident that Thelwall's exposition of the moral and intellectual character of man and its consequences for the development of the individual and society was deeply indebted to Godwinism. But, as we have seen, while he accepted the doctrine of perfectibility, he refrained from specifying the attributes of the millennium, not describing with minute particularity the mode of domestic and social life in the future, but wisely confining himself to generalities about the supremacy of reason and benevolence. His human sympathy in the presence of immediate suffering and his eager wish to hasten practical reforms like universal suffrage and the abolition of "rotten boroughs" made him indifferent to futile closet speculations.

In his discussions of reforms in social organization, he significantly held aloof from the sheer anarchism of *Political Justice*, and did not set up as the goal of political evolution an age in which men, absolutely free, shall be without the restraint of law or government of any kind. Even in his *Rights of Nature* in which his discussion is purely speculative, Thelwall does not follow Godwin in advocating equality of property. In dealing with this question, he again and again exhibits extreme caution. He even doubts whether Godwin's bold threshing out of the matter in *Political Justice* was not premature. He believes that the philosopher who speculates about the problems of property, is under obligation to exercise the greatest care lest by a rash conclusion, a hasty generalization, or an untimely enunciation of truth favorable to the masses, he should incite cut-throats to pillage and weaken the very foundations of social security. At the same time, Thelwall takes as his basis of property the Godwinian

<sup>23</sup> *A Letter to Francis Jeffray.*

principle as to "the right of the individual to the advantages resulting from his own industry and faculties, employed upon the common elements of nature."<sup>24</sup> This principle the landowner presumptuously violates by an unjust monopoly of the benefits that are the result of the "labour and diligence of the mass of mankind." He ignores his indebtedness to the common toiler, treats him with contempt, pays him a miserable pittance, and condemns his family to misery. Thelwall is profoundly distressed at the incessant drudgery, the innutritious food, and the dreary stagnation of the mind and body which make up the life of the poor and for which the vast accumulation of wealth in the hands of a few is largely responsible. Although as a humane man he would rejoice to see a more equable division of property through the agency of sound legislation, yet he shudders at unseasonable measures which, if carried into effect, would loosen the bonds of society and produce only tumult and violence. What Thelwall is really pleading for is no radical re-organization of the whole system of property, but the just recognition of the social importance of the agricultural laborer, accompanied by a consequent impartial distribution of the necessities of life by virtue of his activity in production. In general it should be observed that in the case of those matters which Godwin discussed at length, but which Thelwall does not touch upon, he omits mention of them, but does not deny their truth. The impression is that his procedure is dictated by his interest in practical measures and a policy of wise caution rather than by disbelief in any of Godwin's radical conclusions.

### III.

The authorship of Thelwall's novel, *The Daughter of Adoption*, belongs to that period of his life when, having been driven from the field of public activity, he was living in retirement at Llys-Wen and struggling with bitter difficulty to

<sup>24</sup> *The Rights of Nature*, Letter III.

support his family.<sup>25</sup> Finally, with the manuscript of the first chapter in his pocket, he walked to London to see if he could dispose of it to some bookseller. Phillips accepted it, and he was responsible for the attribution of the authorship to John Beaufort, a pseudonym obviously derived from the Beaufort Buildings in the Strand where Thelwall had conducted his famous political lectures. The protection of anonymity was sought by more than one writer of Jacobin sympathies when, conscious of social antagonism, he wished to gain an unprejudiced hearing for his work. Under such disguise were produced Godwin's *Antonio* and Holcroft's *The Deserted Daughter* and *He's Much to Blame*.<sup>26</sup>

The incidents in *The Daughter of Adoption* are a tissue of absurdity: kidnapping, long-lost parents, sliding-panels, and stolen documents are all in evidence as in many other contemporary novels. After reading this book one appreciates all the more the sobriety and self-respect of Jane Austen's situations and dialogue. His story, indeed, Thelwall has made the vehicle of Godwinian ideas of marriage. The mind of the heroine, Seraphina, who has been brought up by an Englishman of liberal opinions, has never become the seed-ground of foolish prejudices. She expresses scorn for a "slave of forms and ceremonies" who "believes that the bond of conjugal chastity exists not in the purity of the heart, but in the jingle of mystic phrases." She becomes the mistress of Henry Montfort, but in this relationship she feels neither humiliation nor self-reproach, for she is supported by "conscious innocence." This phrase which is so often in the mouth of revolutionary heroes and heroines, deserves a word of comment, for it is significant of the individualism of the period. The person who is sustained by this feeling

<sup>25</sup> *The Daughter Of Adoption. A Tale of Modern Times* by John Beaufort L.L.D. 4 vols. London 1801. The identity of the authorship is established by the Prefatory Memoir in *Poems Chiefly Written in Retirement* by John Thelwall, Hereford, 1802.

<sup>26</sup> See the present writer's article, "The Reaction against William Godwin," *Mod. Philol.*, Sept., 1918.

has usually violated the laws of established society; nevertheless, he denies the consciousness of guilt because he has acted in accordance with principles, not sanctioned by society, it is true, but formulated by nature and reason. He has defied "antiquated prejudices," has set up his own moral code, and, confident of the purity of his motives, regards himself as a martyr if he becomes the object of social censure.

Seraphina is a rampant Godwinian in her insistence upon the right of private judgment. She bitterly resents Morton's interference in her affairs on the ground that the latter is attempting to "abridge and counteract" her right as a moral agent. When Morton foolishly asserts her authority as a mother, Seraphina bursts out: "A right to direct, madam! What but reason can have any right to direct the moral conduct of a rational being?—I must therefore be the thing my reason bids me be, or I am guilty of the parricide of mind." In the end, however, social ostracism breaks Seraphina's spirit, and she enters into the relationship she had so long condemned. But her marriage is not due to conversion to conventional opinion. Far from it. Her motive indeed is distinctly Godwinian. She recognizes that her position as mistress detaches her from society, hampers the development of her personality, and interferes with the exercise of virtues of social utility, and that as society is at present constituted, it is premature for the individual to carry into practice radical conceptions of marriage. In their own private lives both Godwin and Shelley found it necessary to make similar concessions to received opinion.

We have made it clear that the substance of Thelwall's thought is derived from *Political Justice*, and that, unlike other disciples of Godwin, he does not seem to have outgrown the principles which he had adopted when events in France appeared to justify the glowing hopes of the extreme radicals. One inquiry alone remains. How are we to account for Thelwall's transition from the Rousseauism of such an early work as *The Peripatetic* to the rationalism of *Political*

*Justice?* The transition is, we believe, more apparent than real. Critics have preoccupied themselves with *Political Justice* and have insisted upon its cold, repellent reasoning, failing to observe the paradoxical fact that the logician who wrote *Political Justice*, is responsible for a series of novels that can scarcely be distinguished from the typical sentimental story of the eighteenth century. The explanation would seem to be that a sentimental strain inheres in the thought of *Political Justice* itself, and that the novels merely reveal its ultimate tendencies.<sup>27</sup> Godwin's doctrine that man is the product of circumstances, relieves the individual of responsibility for his own acts, and undoubtedly sanctions the expression of unrestrained pity for the wrongdoer as is exemplified by Godwin's own compassion for the prisoners and thieves in *Caleb Williams*. The theory of universal benevolence, presented in cold, intellectual fashion in *Political Justice*, expands into the rhapsodic effusions of *St. Leon* and *Mandeville*. Indeed, Godwin may be said to sentimentalize about reason itself, for certainly his faith in its power creates a boundless optimism that plays upon susceptible feelings. If this point of view be warranted, it is easy to see that Thelwall, a man of ardent temperament and a Rousseauist, would not find it as difficult as might at first be imagined, to respond to the teaching of *Political Justice*. In the midst of its austere rationalism and dignity of intellectual statement he encountered doctrines amply satisfying to his emotional nature and permitting the free play of his eager sympathies. Accordingly, he is consistent in his Godwinism when he utters an apostrophe to "the kind and candid feelings of the heart," and assures "the sooty African" that he "need lift his fettered hands no more to remind him that he is a *Man* and a *Brother!*"<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> See the present writer's article, "William Godwin as a Sentimentalist," *P. M. L. A.*, XXXIII, 1.

<sup>28</sup> *On the Moral Tendency of a System of Spies and Informers*.